

THE COAT OF ARMS

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GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THE ORIGIN OF THE ARMS AND FLAG OF THE UNITED STATES.

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Abstract:

The idea that George Washington and his coat of arms may have influenced the design of the flag and seal of the United States of America is now unpopular with historians. In particular, his role in the evolution of the national flag has become obscured, yet he is the only individual with the authority to have approved the two precursor flags, the Grand Union Flag of December 1775, and his own command flag of early 1777. It will be argued that these flags were combined to create the Stars and Stripes, which was authorised by Congress in July 1777. The flag in turn became the basis of the national arms, approved in 1782. While Washington did not have any personal oversight of the development of the arms, as the commander of the armed forces he was the highest authority in the land during their period of their development. The various committees which submitted designs for the arms incorporated references to Washington's command flag, and one design even placed him as a supporter. The inclusion of certain masonic elements is also noteworthy given that Washington was a prominent and public exponent of freemasonry. A strong case can be made that Washington's personal choices must have made a strong impact on those who met to approve both arms and flag.

The arms of the United States of America (**Figure 1**) very clearly derive from the national flag, which preceded them by five years. Both are brilliant pieces of design which are richly symbolic, and must rank in the very top few of the most iconic examples of their type in the world. The flag was approved by Congress in 1777, and the arms were chosen to adorn the obverse of the great seal in 1782. The two key elements of the flag are both expressed in the arms: firstly, the horizontal stripes of the flag become vertical whenever the flag is suspended, and became pallets on the arms; secondly, the canton without its stars became the chief, and the stars became the crest of the arms. There is a fair degree of unanimity amongst North American historians that the arms are not based on those of George Washington (**Figure 2**), and that he himself played no role in the development of either the arms or the flag.¹ In essence Washington's bars and mullets are now regarded as being only coincidentally similar to the national arms. Such a strongly held collective

¹ Joseph McMillan, *George Washington, 1st President of the United States*, The American Herald No. 1 (2006); Richard S. Patterson & Richardson Dougall (Department of State, Washington, D.C., 1976) *The eagle and the shield: a history of the great seal of the United States* pp.524–6.

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Figure 1: The arms of the United States of America as approved in 1782 (Wikimedia).

view cannot have developed without sound reasoning, and yet it overturned the opinions of nineteenth century historians who are now dismissed as being the victims of dewy eyed romanticism, wrongly swayed by a national veneration for George Washington.² Given that both the arms and the flag were approved at a time when George Washington was the effective leader of his nation, can it really be that his personal arms did not influence the design? This paper will re-explore in detail the evidence.

² For instance, George Henry Preble *Our Flag: origin and progress of the flag of the United States of America* (Albany, New York: Joel Munsell 1872) p.225. See Marc Leepson, *Flag: an American biography* (New York 2005) p.34.

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The Flag

The evolution of the national flag is key to this story, but there has been much confusion here, with a variety of competing theories, mixed in with legendary aspects. We must begin with the Boston Tea Party of 16th December 1773 when men dressed as Mohawk Indians attacked three ships in Boston harbour and discharged their cargoes of Indian tea into the Charles river, having first raised the flag of liberty at the Liberty Tree. Furlong and McCandless in their detailed study of the United States flag attempted to legitimise a legend in connection with this incident.³ The legend is that the Liberty Flag consisted of thirteen alternating stripes of red and white, a version of which later came to represent the thirteen colonies united in opposition to the imposition of import duty on tea by the mother country. While it is undeniable that there was disquiet in all the colonies on the matter of import duty, there was no united opposition at this point. That did not come until 1774 and the sitting of the First Continental Congress. The choice of a multiple striped flag to represent the colonies would have made little sense in 1773. The evidence cited to support this Liberty Flag is the fragment of a flag bearing nine alternating red and white stripes, still preserved in Boston, and said once to have flown on the Liberty Tree. There are various known types of liberty flag from this period, none of them charged with stripes, and no literary record preserves what form the Boston flag took in 1773, but it is highly improbable that the surviving Boston fragment was part of such a flag. More likely it is part of the union flag which came into use a couple of years later.

The British parliament made the unfortunate decision to punish the Bostonians with a blockade and martial law, and the indignation which ensued led to George Washington becoming involved. He was unanimously elected as commander-in-chief of the army by the Second Continental Congress at Philadelphia on 15th June 1775, and soon afterwards went to take control of the forces at Boston. While still stationed there on 4th January 1776 he received a copy of King George III's speech to the two houses of Parliament of 26th October 1775, made in opposition to the American rebels. This was read at out to the troops at Cambridge, Massachusetts, following the raising of a new flag of thirteen alternating stripes of red and white with a canton of the union jack (**Figure 3**). Washington referred to this as the Union Flag, a compliment to the thirteen colonies.⁴ Since the nineteenth century it has been known as the Grand Union Flag. A month previously this same flag was raised on the Union's first naval ship, the Alfred.⁵ Washington himself had inaugurated the navy on 2nd September 1775 by ordering the arming a schooner, and the navy remained under his personal authority.⁶ It is not known who designed the Union Flag, but Congress did not involve itself in this military matter, and the only other authority was that of the commander-in-chief of the army, so Washington must have personally approved it. Can it really be a coincidence that the most striking feature

³ William R.Furlong and Byron McCandless, *So proudly we hail; the history of the United States flag* (Washington, D.C., 1981) p.60.

⁴ W.W.Abbott, Dorothy Twohig and Philander D.Chase (Eds), *The papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series*, 12 vols (Charlottesville VA 1985- in progress) [hereinafter GWRW] vol 3 p.24.

⁵ Furlong McCandless pp.90–1. This flag is known to have been made by the Philadelphia seamstress Margaret Manny, see Leepson, op cit pp. 51,276.

⁶ James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington in the American Revolution 1775–1783* (London, 1972) p.53.

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Figure 2: the coat of arms of George Washington. Source: Wikimedia.

of the flag, the stripes, are in Washington's personal livery colours of red and white, taken from his arms? A month after he ordered the flag to be raised outside Boston, he sent a directive to his commanders that every regiment should have a flag based on the regimental colours, "as the colonel may chose".⁷ It could be argued that he had operated the same principal in his choice of colours for the army and navy.

⁷ GWRW vol 3 p.347.

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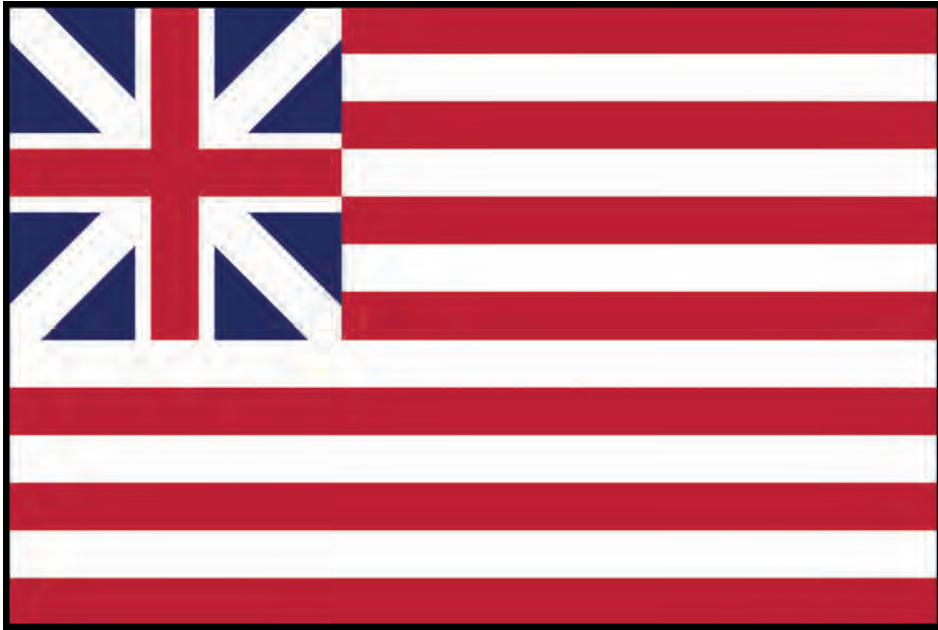


Figure 3: The Union Flag of the Continental army and navy, first flown in December 1775 and now known as the Grand Union Flag (Paul.A.Fox).

It has been widely observed that the Grand Union Flag simply copied the flag of the East India Company⁸, but the resemblance can scarcely have been intended. The East India Company had aroused the ire of the American people because the tax on its tea was the spark that ignited the revolution. The antipathy of the colonialists towards the company is reflected in the accusatory cry of “East India” that went up as demonstrators boarded the *Beaver* during the Boston Tea Party.⁹ The East India Company flag was never seen in the colonies since by royal edict of 1676 it was not to be flown north of the island of St Helena, its ships being directed instead to fly the red ensign, with the flag of St George as the jack.¹⁰ Moreover, the three ships that carried the tea into Boston harbour in 1773 were all American owned and financed.¹¹ Thus the only Americans who had ever seen the company flag were sailors and the students of almanacs. It should also be noted that the number of stripes on the company flag was not fixed, and could be any number from seven to nineteen.¹² Notwithstanding, revolutionary intellectuals of the calibre of Thomas Jefferson (who visited Washington for a conference at his headquarters near Boston in Cambridge in October 1775) would likely have advised against the flag that Washington approved on the

⁸ Appleton p.27 and personal communication from Prof D’Arcy Boulton.

⁹ Benjamin Carp, *Defiance of the patriot- the Boston Tea Party and the making of America* (Yale, 2010) p.128.

¹⁰ Furlong and McCandless p.44

¹¹ See www.bostonteapartyship.com and Carp, op cit, p.75–6.

¹² Preble p.221; Furlong and McCandless p.43.

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grounds of its similarity to the East India Company flag.¹³ In what was stated to have been an actual meeting, but was actually a fictionalised account, the East India Company flag was proposed as the model for a new Union Flag.¹⁴ This meeting was (impossibly) said to have taken place in Cambridge on the 13th December between Jefferson and Washington. The legend is perhaps the basis of the current widely held contention that the Union Flag copied that of the East India Company. In reality, the choice was more likely made in complete ignorance of the East India Company Flag, and therefore points to a headquarters decision made by Washington and his officers with no outside interference. In the context in which it was used the Grand Union Flag could represent the united colonies without too much confusion. In order to avoid giving out false signals at sea the ships of the American navy from early 1776 flew a pine tree flag from the mainmast as a mark of distinction.¹⁵

On the 4th July 1776 Congress ratified the Declaration of Independence, and later that same day John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were charged with overseeing the design of a coat of arms for a new great seal.¹⁶ It should be noted that nobody was asked to design a new flag. Their complex design for the seal, which was rejected, included devices for the six European countries of origin (England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany and Holland) and for all thirteen states, plus masonic elements, of which more will be said below (**Figure 4**).¹⁷ By this time the British had sailed away from Boston and Washington was engaged in military action against British interests New York City. Receiving word of the declaration on 9th July Washington recorded feeling “the sadness with which one breaks at long last and forever with in old love”.¹⁸ For much of his earlier life he had played at being the quintessential fox hunting English gentleman, one who had all his clothes made in London.

A new member of Congress who signed the Declaration of Independence was Francis Hopkinson, who came from Philadelphia, but at the time of his election to Congress in June 1776 he was living in New Jersey. A man of ability, he quickly found himself sitting on various congressional committees. He also had an artistic bent, and an interest in heraldry. During his stay in England in 1766–7 he drew the arms of his kinsman, the scrivener Matthew Hopkinson of Westminster, with its three mullets of six points in chief, in Paddington churchyard.¹⁹ Hopkinson himself used the same arms, *Argent, on a chevron between three mullets of six points gules as many lozenges of the field within a bordure vert*. For his bookplate see **Figure 5**. In December 1775 he had published an article in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* entitled “consideration on the use and abuse of mottoes”. Importantly, on 12th July 1776 he joined the Marine Committee, and on

¹³ The minutes of the October 1775 conference survive, and flags were not discussed, see GWRW vol 2 pp.190–5.

¹⁴ Robert Allen Campbell, *Our flag, or the evolution of the Stars and Stripes* (Chicago IL, 1890) pp. 35–49 (47). By the time of this supposed meeting the flag had already been raised on the Alfred.

¹⁵ Furlong and McCandless pp.79 (fig 58) , 87–8.

¹⁶ David B Appleton, ‘The United States of America: the search for a national coat of arms’, *Genealogia and Heraldica, influences of genealogy and heraldry on the history of a nation* (Oslo, 2015) pp.23–34.

¹⁷ The crest comprised an eye of providence in radiant triangle.

¹⁸ Flexner p.97 citing John C. Fitzpatrick (ed) *The writings of George Washington from the original manuscript sources 1745–1799* (Washington, D.C., 1931–44) vol 5 pp.92, 239, 247.

¹⁹ George E Hastings, *The life and works of Francis Hopkinson* (Chicago IL, 1926) pp 8,238.

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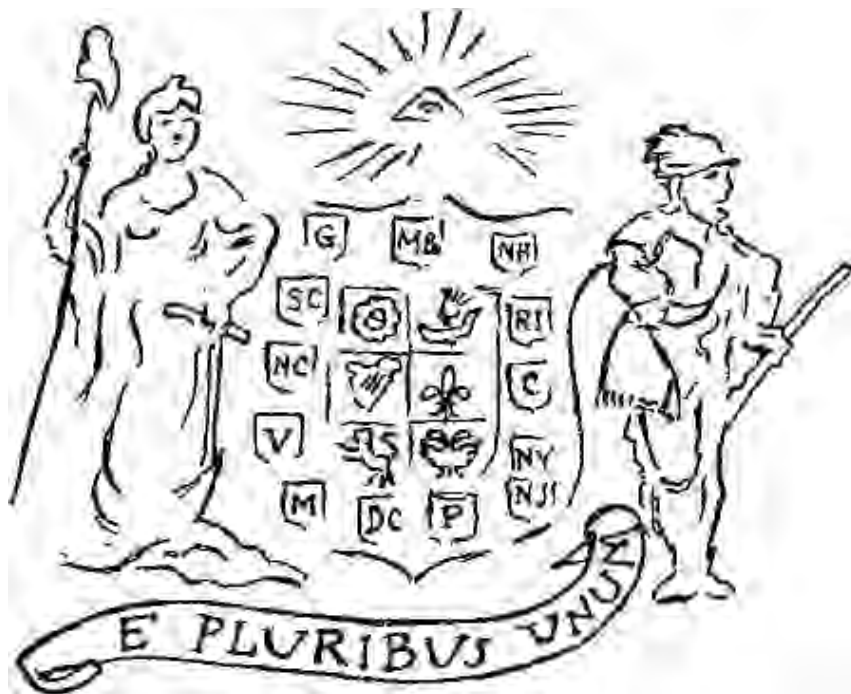


Figure 4: The first design for the U.S. seal as sketched by Pierre Eugène du Simitière in 1776 (U.S. Dept of State). The motto E Pluribus unum is believed to have been taken from the frontispiece of the Gentleman's Magazine.

6th September he was asked to design a state seal for the Council and Assembly of New Jersey. On 18th November he was appointed to the new Navy Board, or Board of Admiralty, of which he was both chairman and secretary. Another member of the same board was John Nixon, a shipping merchant whose ship the Antrim had been converted into the navy's first warship, renamed the Alfred, in late 1775. This was the very ship on which the Grand Union Flag was first raised, but many months before Hopkinson was involved with the Navy Board. In 1780 Hopkinson invoiced the Treasury for amongst other designs, that of the flag of the United States of America, which he subsequently referred to as the Naval Flag.²⁰ Following the Declaration of Independence both the army and the the navy needed a distinctive flag. The Navy Board worked closely with, and was

²⁰ His invoice was also for seven currency designs and a seal for the Board of Treasury; Hastings op cit p.240. It was acknowledged that his invoice was reasonable, and should be paid, but the Treasury kept stalling. There was a sense that as a well paid public servant his services should be considered as part of his employment. The Board of Admiralty continued to support his request for payment, while the Treasury "employed many ingenious devices" to delay payment. These included the observation that Hopkinson was not the sole person consulted (a comment which might equally apply to flag and seal designs) and as such should not receive the full amount charged. In 1781 Hopkinson's anger concerning non payment led to his resignation; Hastings pp. 241–254.



Figure 5: The personal bookplate of Francis Hopkinson

answerable to, George Washington, who following the Declaration of Independence, and the disavowal of King George III as head of state, became “the new symbol of authority and de facto sovereign of the American Revolution”.²¹

²¹ Ellis p.78

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It is into this milieu that we must place the legend of Betsy Ross, who claimed to have made the first ever version of the Stars and Stripes. Betsy, who was a Philadelphia seamstress and widow, had always maintained to her family that she created this flag following a visit from George Washington in early June 1776. The General was said to have been accompanied by George Ross, the uncle of Betsy's deceased husband, and by one Robert Morris. The drawing presented to her had thirteen stars of six points on the blue canton, which replaced the Union Jack of the Grand Union Flag. She claimed to have advised against having six pointed stars, and demonstrated how quickly five pointed stars could be cut out. Her biographer Marla Miller suggested that she might have possessed this knowledge having previously made cushions for her late husband's masonic lodge, the pentagram being an important symbol in freemasonry.²² Betsy's account was recorded by her grandson, and by other members of the family, almost a hundred years after the event, and cannot be correct in the form given.²³ The most obvious problem with the story is that the new flag was not approved until over a year later, and Robert Morris' involvement at that time is quite inconceivable given that he was then an opponent of independence.²⁴ It is a matter of record that Betsy was paid to make flags for the navy on 29th May 1777, two weeks before Congress approved the Stars and Stripes. This must surely be the kernel of truth behind the story, and since Morris was elected to the Marine Committee in late 1776 he is a very plausible intermediary for Hopkinson. The next question must be whether Washington's stated involvement was entirely false. The General's movements are well known, and he was not in Philadelphia in May 1777. His go ahead would have been mandatory in May 1777 prior to congressional approval, otherwise the expenditure might have been wasted. It is proposed that Hopkinson made a careful drawing of the flag, which Morris took to Betsy, and that it was fed back to her that she could proceed after Washington gave his consent to the five pointed stars. In other words that she did indeed consult with Washington, but not at first hand.

Two aspects provide additional plausibility to this scenario. The first is that Hopkinson had a penchant for six pointed stars, as they occur on his personal arms and on his own design for the great seal of the republic, drawn in 1779–80. The second is that Washington's personal command flag of thirteen six pointed silver stars on a light blue background pre-dates the Stars and Stripes. The light blue colour comes from the light blue sash worn by the commander-in-chief, as stipulated by general orders on 14th July 1775.²⁵ The flag is illustrated by both James Peale and by his brother Charles Willson Peale in their respective paintings of the Battle of Princeton on 3rd January 1777. James Peale was an army officer from 1776 to 1779 and a participant in the battle who must have been very well familiar with Washington's command flag. In his version, commissioned

²² Marla R Miller, *Betsy Ross and the making of America* (New York, 2010) pp.187–8.

²³ William J. Canby *The History of the Flag of the United States* (1870) is printed in full with affidavits from Betsy Ross' daughter and other members of the family at www.ushistory.org/betsy/more/canby.htm

²⁴ Miller p. 181. Other named women are known to have been making revolutionary flags in 1775, including the Grand Union Flag, the nautical rattlesnake and pine-tree flags, and the flag raised by Washington in January 1776, Miller op cit pp 174–5, 177. For more on the rattlesnake and pine-tree flags see Furlong and McCandless pp.73, 87–8.

²⁵ Charles Allen Munn, *Three types of Washington portraits* (New York, 1908) p.25.



Figure 6: George Washington at the Battle of Princeton January 1777 as later painted by James Peale (Princeton University Art Museum). It is argued that the General's Command Flag as shown here was correct for that date.

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Figure 7: A surviving Command Flag of George Washington flown according to tradition at his camp in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania in the winter of 1777-8. The stars are very close to the margins, suggesting that the flag has been cut down from its original size. (Drawn by the author).

in 1783, the six pointed stars occur in lines, just as in the Valley Forge Flag from later that year (**Figure 6**). The Valley Forge Flag is stated to have been used at Washington's winter camp at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, in 1777-8. It has an excellent provenance because it was originally owned by a descendant of Washington's only sister.²⁶ It has been cut down from a larger flag, having thirteen six pointed stars in white silk on a pale blue background (**Figure 7**).

Charles Willson Peale's painting of Washington with captured British flags following the Battle of Princeton was signed and dated 1779.²⁷ Charles Peale also served in the army, more briefly than his brother, and was also at the Battle of Princeton. In his 1779 version of the command flag the six pointed stars are arranged in a circle. The difference can be explained with reference to a version of the same painting by the same artist in 1780, which had Washington's blue sash painted out before it was finished, because in 1780 the uniform of the commander-in-chief was changed from a blue sash to three silver

²⁶ Furlong and McCandless pp.119-20.

²⁷ This picture was sold at Christies in 2006, and an excellent account of it can be found at www.christies.com/lotfinder under sale 1618 lot 547. It realised 21 million USD.

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Figure 8: Charles Willson Peale's 1779 painting of George Washington after the Battle of Princeton (Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas). Note the light blue commanding general's sash which Peale painted out before he finished his own later copy of 1780. It is argued that the Command Flag show here is correct for 1779.

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stars on the epaulettes.²⁸ The amendment proves that Charles Willson Peale's portraits contained conscious anachronisms, because he felt that military paraphernalia should be up to date at the time of painting. The command flag with the stars in circle logically dates to 1779, while in his brother's eyewitness painting of the actual battle, although painted later, the flag is accurate for 1777, as is confirmed by the Valley Forge Flag.

The wording of the Congressional approval for the Stars and Stripes on 14th June 1777 is as follows: "Resolved, That the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes alternate red and white: that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation" (**Figure 9**). Note that the form and arrangement of the stars was unspecified. On the basis of the above evidence the canton of the flag derives from Washington's command flag, and emanated from his command tent, just as the Grand Union Flag had done. The Betsy Ross story of the original design for the Stars and Stripes having six pointed stars lends further support to this contention, if it is accepted that her story has some basis in fact. Hopkinson respectfully placed the commander-in-chief's flag in the place of that which stood for the British sovereign in the canton of the Grand Union Flag. This raises the possibility that Washington was not just the approver, but actually the original source for all of the component parts of the final design.



Figure 9: The thirteen star United States flag as it is believed to have looked in 1777.

The permission given to Betsy Ross to use five pointed stars did not lead to the formal adoption of this version, and the failure of Congress to specify the number of star points resulted in some regional variation. The number of star points on recordings of the form of the American flag between 1779 and 1783 varied between five and eight,

²⁸ <https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/39532>.

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with five pointed versions predominating.²⁹ That The correct number of points was five is suggested by the stars on Washington's epaulettes (**Figure 10**), datable to 1787 on a portrait and engraving by Charles Willson Peale, and to 1782–4 on the epaulettes of Peale's portrait of General Arthur St Clair.³⁰



Figure 10: George Washington by James Peale copied from a portrait by his brother dating 1787.

²⁹ Grace Rogers Cooper, *Thirteen star flags: keys to Identification* (Washington, D.C., 1973) pp.3–5.

³⁰ Peale's portrait is in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia., and that of St Clair (also by Charles Willson Peale) is at the Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia

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Figure 11: Francis Hopkinson's design for the Great Seal 1780.
(U.S. National Archives 595252).

From Flag to Coat of Arms

In March 1779 the second committee assembled to produce a great seal for the nation sought the assistance of Francis Hopkinson. The earlier design had taken as its crest an eye of providence in radiant triangle, which Patterson and Dougall suggested was not consciously masonic in its symbolism.³¹ Hopkinson produced a design which was properly heraldic in having shield, crest, supporters and motto (**Figure 11**). He took the thirteen stripes of the flag and placed them bendwise across the shield. The crest of a radiant constellation of thirteen stars he took from the canton, or perhaps directly

³¹ Richard Sharpe Patterson and Richardson Dougall, *The eagle and the shield: a history of the Great Seal of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1976) pp.19, 532.

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from Washington's personal flag. As stated previously these stars had six points. The supporters were a warrior, dressed like a Roman, and a female personification of Peace. The 1776 design had no reverse, but Hopkinson added one by employing a female figure with a cap of liberty. This design, presented in May 1780, was not felt to be entirely satisfactory, and like the first design was ordered to lie on the table.

A third committee, convened in May 1782, took as its consultant William Barton, who had been interested in heraldry from an early age. Barton visited Isaac Heard, then Norroy King of Arms, at the College of Arms in 1778, in order to register the Barton pedigree.³² Barton drew two designs, both of which re-introduced masonic elements. In his first design the key element of the shield was the stripes from the flag, which he made barry. In his second design the canton was converted into a border azure charged with thirteen stars (with multiple points- more than six). The supporters which he chose for his second design are of some interest. One was a female personification of the genius of the American Republic, while the other was an American warrior.



Figure 12: William Barton's design for the Great Seal 1782 (U.S. Dept of State)

³² Milton Rubincam, 'A memoir of the life of William Barton, A.M. (1754–1817)' *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, vol 12 no. 3 (July 1945), pp. 179–193.

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The female figure wears Washington's Command Flag as a sash, while the warrior is dressed in the uniform of a senior American military officer of blue faced with buff, as worn by George Washington (**Figure 12**). That this figure was intended to represent Washington is confirmed by the fact that he wielded a marshal's baton, described as being azure, semy of stars argent.³³ It is to be doubted whether any individual other than Washington qualified for such a baton at this time. In both of Barton's designs the reverse comprised a step pyramid of thirteen levels capped with the eye of providence without the triangle. These elements were separately present on Hopkinson's forty and fifty dollar bank notes which were issued in 1778.³⁴



Figure 13. Barton's design for the reverse of the Great Seal. 1782 (U.S.Dept of State)

³³ Patterson and Dougall p.68.

³⁴ Patterson and Dougall p.35.

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In June 1782 yet another consultant, Charles Thomson, was called in, and he worked with Barton to come up with the design which was finally approved a week later by Congress on 20th June. The position of the stripes was moved again, becoming paly, now with an azure chief. Hopkinson's crest of the radiant constellation was resurrected, again with stars of six points. It might be argued that this retained the homage to Washington which was expressed to a greater or lesser degree in all of the previous designs. Barton's design for the reverse was retained (**Figure 13**) but with the eye placed once again in radiant triangle.³⁵ In May 1782, only a month before Congress approved the seal, Washington had found it necessary to quash rumours that he might become king.³⁶ The supporters were jettisoned in favour of an American eagle, later expressed as a bald eagle, but retained the aspects of war and peace by holding the olive branch and the bundle of arrows (**Figure 14**).



Figure 14: the matrix for the first Great Seal of the United States.
(U.S. National Archives 596742)

³⁵ Patterson and Dougall p.78.

³⁶ Ellis p.139.

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Washington's defeat of the British at the Battle of Yorktown in April 1781 had signalled the end of Britain's hopes for restoring hegemony over her North American colonies, and following the peace treaty signed in Paris in November 1783 Washington stepped down from his military command. His election for two consecutive terms as the first president of the United States (1789–1797) cemented his status as a national icon around whom numerous legends developed.

The symbolism of freemasonry and its influence on the design.

George Washington was a prominent freemason from his early days in Virginia and was asked to become the Grand Master of the new Grand Lodge of Virginia in 1778, although he declined, as it was impractical for him to take on the role at that time.³⁷ It has been stated that most of the officers in Washington's revolutionary army were freemasons, and that the majority owed their fealty to the Provincial Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, which established seven military lodges at the outset of the war to move with the army.³⁸ A partial list from just one of the Philadelphia lodges dating 1775–80 included 16 army colonels, 10 majors and 28 captains.³⁹ Philadelphia was the cradle of American freemasonry, and site of the first purpose built Lodge, dedicated in 1755 for a membership of seafaring men, artisans and tradesmen. The city was also the cradle of the struggle for independence and the seat of government, and in the masonic lodges army officers rubbed shoulders with prominent members of Congress. Here gentry met on equal terms with the middling classes, and men of varying religious allegiances, including Anglicans and Quakers, came together without rancour. The royalist lodges of New England (the so called 'Moderns') gradually faded away during the course of the war while the independent minded 'Ancient York Masons' buzzed with activity.⁴⁰ It is easy to see why Washington was keen to promote freemasonry as a means of furthering a necessary esprit de corps in his army. In 1778 Washington was asked to lead the annual masonic procession in Philadelphia at the head of three hundred fellow initiates.

The invitation plate for Philadelphia 'Ancient' Lodge no.1 (later no.2), engraved in 1759 feature a radiant eye with a triangle above, and above that two open compasses form pyramidal shapes. (**Figure 15**).⁴¹ This establishes that some of the symbolism employed on the U.S. seal was known to many of those most closely connected with the affairs of the revolutionary state, and it cannot be argued that these emblems were only adopted by the masons after they became popularised by the government in various ways. Patterson and Dougall pointed out that the eye in radiant triangle is an ancient symbol, which is certainly true. It represents the eye of God and the Holy Trinity in many medieval cathedrals, and I have found examples in the Catholic churches of Aachen, Bruges, Cadiz and Prague. It has been suggested that Pierre Eugène du Simitière (d.1784), who made the drawing of the eye in radiant triangle as the advisor for the first committee for the

³⁷ Charles H. Callahan, *Washington, the man and the mason*, 6th ed (Washington, D.C., 1913) p.266.

³⁸ Norris S. Barratt and Julius F. Sachse, *Freemasonry in Pennsylvania 1727–1907 as shown by the records of Lodge No.2 of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1908) pp.30, 247–8.

³⁹ Norris and Sachse p.xiii

⁴⁰ Norris and Sachse pp.1–9.

⁴¹ Norris and Sachse pp.44–5, 49.

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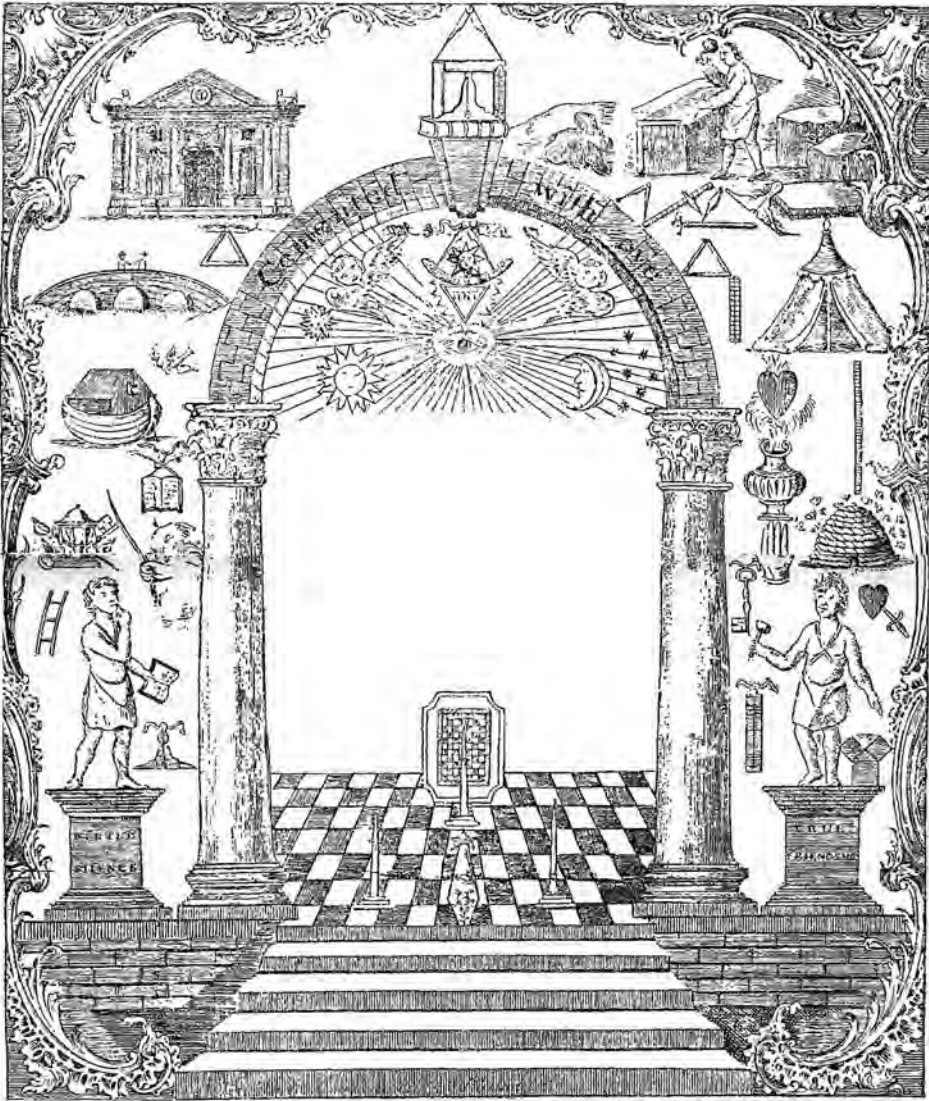


Figure 15: The Philadelphia Lodge summons plate of 1759. It includes a variety of elements which bear interesting comparison with Barton's design for the Great Seal.

U.S. arms, was a great collector of books, and that he probably came across the depiction from that source. Simitière was a Swiss Calvinist who left Europe at the age of twenty.⁴² He is unlikely either to have visited Catholic churches or to have collected Catholic imagery. Moreover, he was introduced onto the committee by Benjamin Franklin, who was a very prominent freemason and had served as Grand Master in Pennsylvania.

⁴² Ellen G. Miles, 'Pierre Eugène du Simitière (1737–1784), *American National Biography*.

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Figure 16: George Washington's signet ring.

Simitière would need to have been remarkably unobservant to be unaware that the eye was a key symbol of freemasonry. Moreover the device would not have been used by the Protestant denominations in their simple churches.

Hopkinson, who placed the pyramid and the eye of providence on the currency, was another very close friend of Franklin and it is a reasonable supposition that Franklin would have invited him to become a mason.⁴³ Freemasons from their early history have

⁴³ Dixon Wecter, 'Francis Hopkinson and Benjamin Franklin', *American Literature* vol 12 no.2 (1940) pp.200–17.

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represented God most often using three particular devices: the letter G, the all seeing eye, and the equilateral triangle.⁴⁴ The first two were taken from ancient Judaism, and the last two from ancient Egypt. To freemasons God is the supreme architect, and hence buildings such as the Temple of Solomon and the pyramids carry a particular resonance. In a treatise on masonic symbolism it is stated of the equilateral triangle that “there is no symbol which is more generally diffused throughout the whole system of freemasonry”.⁴⁵ The author goes on to say that the triangle is generally surrounded by a circle of rays, called a ‘glory’ (note the same term was used for the crest of the U.S. arms), an emblem of God’s eternal glory and a representation of the eternal light of wisdom which surrounds the supreme architect.⁴⁶ If freemasonry was a stimulus for Hopkinson’s designs then he was careful to adapt and give them additional levels of meaning. The pyramid is a good masonic expression of the equilateral triangle, but Hopkinson obscured any link with freemasonry by turning the monument into a stepped pyramid of thirteen steps for the thirteen colonies, lacking any capstone. The all seeing eye he placed in glory, but without the triangle, although similar usage can be found in contemporary freemasonry, as in the invitation plate of Number One Lodge in Philadelphia.

One final aspect of freemasonry which must be considered in terms of its possible influence is that of the Command Flag of George Washington. Stars feature prominently both in masonic regalia and in the lodges themselves. Anyone who has visited a lodge will have been impressed by the starry blue ceilings, the subject of various masonic liturgies as a reminder of God’s majesty:

*The spacious firmament on high
With all the blue ethereal sky
And spangled heavens, a shining frame
Their great original proclaim*⁴⁷

It is not difficult to conceive that the Lodge building itself, and everything that it meant to Washington and his officers, might have inspired the canton of the star spangled banner. These stars, being points of light, might have any number of rays emanating, but we must consider also the relevance of the five pointed stars which Betsy Ross perhaps made for the Philadelphia Lodge. In masonic ritual the five pointed star represents the endless triangle and is called the Pentacle of Solomon; it is a reminder of the five points of fellowship.⁴⁸ To Washington the suggestion of giving the banner five pointed stars for reasons of practicality would have fitted in well with his own masonic training. For a time both his command flag and his uniform retained six pointed stars because they had equal validity, but eventually the five pointed star won over almost completely in United States iconography.

Aftermath: Washington and Garter Heard.

In September 1788, prior to the commencement of the first U.S. presidential election, William Barton wrote to Washington, and after reminding him that he had played a

⁴⁴ Albert G. Mackey, *The symbolism of Freemasonry* (New York, 1882) p.189.

⁴⁵ Mackey p.192.

⁴⁶ Mackey pp.195–6.

⁴⁷ Jeremiah How, *The Freemason’s Manual, or illustrations of masonry* (London, 1862) p.112.

⁴⁸ How p.141.

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role in the design of the great seal, he expressed concern about political opposition to heraldry on the grounds of egalitarianism, it being considered as redolent of rank and nobility. Washington's reply made the observation that Congress had adopted armorial designs, and stated that in his view heraldry was compatible with "the purest spirit of Republicanism".⁴⁹ In early 1792 Washington received a letter from Isaac Heard (dated 7th December 1791) who had risen to become Garter King of Arms. It would be interesting to know whether some particular encounter prompted this missive. Heard's first wife Katherine Tyler (d.1783) had been an American, and he had a strong interest in maintaining American pedigrees.⁵⁰ Heard stated that his intermediary was surnamed Thornton: "I have requested Mr Thornton to lay this before Your Excellency & to receive the honour of any commands your Excellency may be pleased to confer on Your Excellency's most respectful & most obedient, humble Servant."⁵¹ Mr Thornton was presumably Washington's friend William Thornton (d.1828), an Englishman who became a United States citizen in 1788, and who went on to design the U.S. Capitol building, at Washington's request, in 1793. Washington laid the cornerstone of the Capitol Building on 18th September 1793 in an overtly masonic ceremony as acting Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Maryland.⁵² Garter sent the President a drawing of the Washington arms together with some pedigrees, all of which can be viewed online at the website of the Library of Congress.⁵³ His aim was to fill in some gaps in the Washington pedigree, and a correspondence was initiated which went on for almost five years. Unfortunately Heard arrived at an erroneous conclusion when he derived Washington's ancestors from Sulgrave in Northamptonshire.⁵⁴ This hardly mattered: the President knew what his family arms were. Since long before the American Revolution was conceived George Washington had maintained a strong personal interest in heraldry, his personal arms were displayed at every opportunity (for his signet and bookplate see **Figures 16 and 17**), and his red and white livery was worn by his servants.⁵⁵ Thus it was that in the apogee of his career Garter Heard brought him back to his roots.

⁴⁹ Sparks, Washington writings vol 12 pp.297–9. The full correspondence can be found online at <https://tinyurl.com/y7kgcp38>

⁵⁰ David Vines White, 'Sir Isaac Heard 1730–1822', New DNB; Anthony R. Wagner, 'An Eighteenth Century King of Arms' Collection of American Pedigrees', *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, (Jan. 1941), pp. 20–28.

⁵¹ Philander D Chase (Ed) *The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series*, vol 9 (Charlottesville VA 19 vols, various Eds, in progress 1985–) pp.258–60.

⁵² William Moseley Brown, *George Washington, freemason* (Richmond VA, 1952) pp.60–3.

⁵³ <https://www.loc.gov/collections/george-washington-papers> and search term Isaac Heard.

⁵⁴ Joseph Lemuel Chester, 'An exposure of a serious error in the pedigree of Washington', *Herald & Genealogist* vol 4 (London, 1867) pp.49–63.

⁵⁵ McMillan, op cit; Duane L.C.M.Galles, 'Washington's armorial heritage today', *COA* no.201 (2003) pp. 23–28 (26–7)

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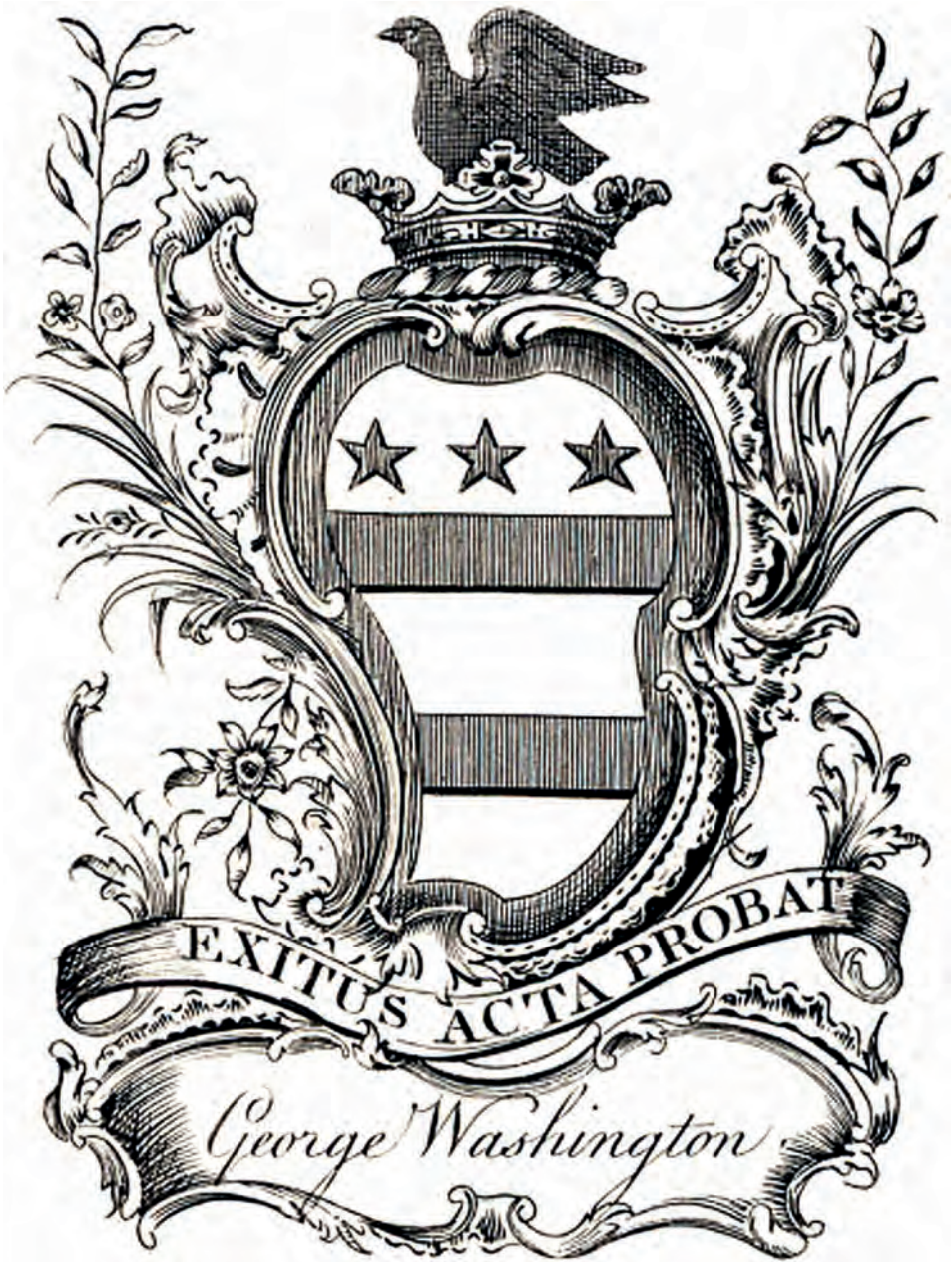


Figure 17: George Washington's bookplate of 1771.